

The Boria.

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Penang is the home of the *Boria* and this annual feast of fun is looked forward to by old and young Malays and Chinese alike with the greatest excitement and curiosity.

The name *Boria* is applied to the performances of a troupe of strolling minstrels who appear during the first ten days of the Muharram and at no other time of the year. Each troupe consists of twenty to forty youths, usually friends or inhabitants of the same locality, who band together for the purpose of enjoyment and emulation with the prospect of earning enough money for a bean feast on the completion of their labours. Being as penurious as the majority of their fellow countrymen they have first to find a manager who will finance the whole concern and reimburse himself with interest from the profits.

This matter being arranged, a *tukang karang* or composer and leading tenor is chosen and it devolves on him to determine the key-tune or chorus of the troupe and the words to be sung to it, which should contain allusion to the locality from which the troupe spring and if possible a reference to what they represented last year. It is necessary next to divide the party into the two divisions of musicians and players, the latter being subdivided into star-turns and chorus.

Having decided what the troupe is going to represent such as a band of European or Arab soldiery or a group of Chinese or Javanese or any other class of people, the manager proceeds to purchase outfits suitable for the part and hires or borrows the musical instruments.

The band usually consists of half a dozen instruments varying in nature with the representation, and it approximates both in tune and structure to the national instruments of the country represented. A cavalcade of Bedouins would give prominence to the *maruas* and a group of Indians to the *dol* whilst Chinese or Europeans would be incomplete without the addition of cymbals (*cheⁿ* *cheⁿ* and a drum (*tambor*) respectively.

The one essential instrument is the violin as it is the accompaniment to the recitation of the *tukang karang* or composer.

The two or three star turns are now arranged with regard to the capabilities of the actors to mimic the dancing of the nationality represented, or some trait in their character or well known feature of their daily life. The field is wide and full advantage is taken of it to portray chetties and sensen, blustering officers and coy dancing girls, together with a host of other well known characters.

It only remains to marshal the chorus of twenty or so under a leader and to supply them with walking sticks, staves or wooden guns as occasion demands and a large flag or insignia to be carried at their head.

The preliminaries complete, undress rehearsals take place nightly for an hour or two in some secluded spot, and last for a week, the performers being regaled with light refreshments at the manager's expense.

All being ready, on or about the 5th of Muharram the troupe will set forth in full war paint soon after dark in search of any householder willing to receive (*sambut*) and reward them. There is no difficulty attached to this search. It is customary for any well-to-do Malays or Chinese and even for clubs, who wish to see the performances, to light up their compounds, clear an arena and sit down with their guests invited and uninvited to await the coming of the *Boria*.

The troupe is not long in making its appearance, its advent heralded by the blowing of a horn or similar instrument. The whole band defiles into the arena, to the accompaniment of music and shouting combined with the waving of sticks, and takes up its position facing the principal guests, the chorus forming a background and the band to one side.

The *tukang karang* or composer dressed in resplendent uniform comes to the fore and sings the chorus of his troupe, so that all may know what they are and which district they hail from. This is followed by the whole troupe singing the same refrain in chorus to the loudest music of the band and accompanied by a rhythmic swaying of bodies and brandishing of sticks. The composer then proceeds to sing several verses each punctuated by the chorus of the troupe as before. The quality of these verses depends on the ability of the composer and varies from the set and stilted phraseology of welcome and thanks to the donor of the entertainment, to complimentary and jocose remarks about the various notabilities present, made in the hope of extracting a small present in return. Occasionally the composer dispenses with this procedure and recites a mirthful tale of the arrest of a nyonyah's gambling party or the story of a cock-fight or of some notorious local event of the past year. Whatever the narration, as soon as it is finished the musicians strike up another tune and the star performers go through their turn of dances or acts acrobatic or otherwise.

The performance having lasted about half an hour and other troupes being impatient to enter, the close of the piece is announced in a short verse or two of farewell and the troupe marches out to find fresh fields to conquer.

So the evening wears on with troupe after troupe until the early hours warn both performers and onlookers that it is time they seek rest. These nightly revels continue until the evening of

the 10th of Muharram when they are continued all night until the following morning. Then the jaded troupe wends its way to some previously selected pleasure ground near a stream where after a short *mandi-mandi* or cleansing they devote themselves to the enjoyment of a well-spread table often with a *ronggeng* in accompaniment, until they disperse homewards soon after noon tired but supremely happy. This feast and in fact all the refreshments supplied during the performances as well as the incidental expenses of riksha fares, etc. are supplied by the manager who also presents each member of the troupe with the customary 25 cents when dispersing homewards after each night's performance; in addition to this, the *tukang karang*, the star turns and the band are paid a definite salary of two or three dollars a night, apart from any present that they may receive from the audience.

The financial aspect from the manager's point of view is often none too bright, the only assets being the takings from each house of from \$5 to \$10 or say \$80 for an evening, and at the outside \$400 for the season. Against this are to be set the cost of outfit \$100, fares and salaries \$150, expenses in connection with the feast \$100 or a final profit of \$50.

In Penang the Borias are often a day late in their reckoning of the Muhammadan month so that their *mandi-mandi* falls on the 11th and not on the 10th of Muharram, which is the real Ashura or Tenth *i.e.* the date of the death of Hussain at Kerbela.

In Singapore and Malacca Boria performances in imitation of those in Penang are held during the month of Saafar from the 20th onwards so as to terminate on Mandi Saafar with the usual bathe and feast, but though popular at one time, only one Boria troupe exists now in Singapore as against forty to fifty in Penang.

Once upon a time the advent of the Boria season was rather dreaded by the more peaceful Muhammadans in Penang on account of the frequent collisions which took place between the two factions of the red and white flags, the followers of two noted Sayids of Acheen Street and Jelutong respectively, who had formed secret societies in imitation of and in conjunction with the Chinese. But of recent years this unruly element has died and only an echo remains in an occasional piece of red or white cloth tied to a stick or some challenging allusion in the chorus of one of the troupes concerned.

It would be a thousand pities if the Borias were ever allowed to die out if only for the sake of the opportunity they offer to budding composers, to say nothing of the fun provided free for masses whose lives are dull enough God wot.

The following is a typical chorus intimating that the troupe come from Hutton Lane (*Jalan Hatin*) towards Kedah Road (*Kampong Mēlaka*) and that they are playing the story of Laila Majnun this year in place of Panji Sumerang which was last year's performance.

1. Laila Majnun orang yang muda,
Bersama adzab bersama sangsara,
Panji Sumerang ubah cerita,
Di-Jalan Hatin Kampong Melaka.
2. A free translation of the next chorus would run
Arabs we from the stock of Morocco
Startled from dreams in the depth of a grotto
Hearing the foe's within the gate
At Jalan Baharu we await.

Kita Arab bangsa Maghrabi
Di-dalam goa terkėjut mimpi
Dengar musoh di-dalam negeri
Jalan Baharu sedia menanti.

The remaining choruses are taken at random from last year's Borias and the name of the district from which the troupe come is given at the head in both English and Malay.

3. *Kelawai Road (Mukim Kelawai).*
Badwi tua di-kaki bukit
Keluar menjaga mashrik ka-maghrib
Badwi Arfah ampunya murid
Mukim Kelawai sedia tauhid.
4. *Tanjong Tokong village.*
Kita ashkar di-tanah Janggi,
Kerja menanam gandom barley
Masok berniaga di-tanah Jawi.
Tanjong Tokong sedia menanti.
5. *Bagan Jermal Road (Mukim Bagan).*
Kita dewa orang keyangan
Turun ka-dunia jadi permainan
Tidak tiru sendiri karangan
Mukim Bagan tempat kediaman.
6. *Tanjong Tokong village.*
Kita Arab bukit Tur Sina
Keluar membantu sa-alam dunia
Gerak gempa bunyi bahana
Di-Tanjong Tokong setia nama.
7. *Tanjong Bunga (Bagan Tanjong Bunga).*
Habshi Afrika orang ulu,
Kerja menchari arang batu;
Sa-rata tempat tiada tentu
Bagan Tanjong Bunga menjadi satu.

8. *Kĕlawai Road (Mukim Kĕlawai).*
Mĕlayu Janggi Mĕlayu Sala,
Kĕrja mĕnangkap ikan haruan di-paya;
Sa-tahun sa-kali Mĕlayu mĕnimba
Mukim Kĕlawai aman sĕdia.
9. *Kĕdah Road (Kampong Mĕlaka) and Burmah Road (Tarek Ayer).*
Kami Sehir orang yang muda,
Anak murid mahiran tua;
Pulau Pinang datang mĕngĕmbara,
Di-Tarek Ayer Kampong Mĕlaka.
10. *Kampong Dĕli and the bridge at the junction of Pinang and Burmah Roads (Titi Papan).*
Mĕrgi muda baharu mĕnjadi,
Mĕrgi tua bĕrgĕlar ganti;
Tidak tiru reka sĕndiri
Titi Papan Kampong Dĕli.
11. *Kimberley Street (Padang Garam).*
Askar Yunan Kuantong sama,
Sudah 'resign' daripada China;
Kĕluar mĕnchari som, komkoma,
Anak padang sĕlamat sĕmpurna.
12. *Kampong Java.*
Askar Takrubi kaum bebas,
Padang pĕprangan baharu tĕrlĕpas;
Mĕnangkap nĕgĕri tĕrlalu pantas,
Di-kampong Jawa aturan jĕlas.
13. *Yahudi Road (Lorong Yahudi).*
Badwi Makhdum kaum gila,
Ibarat kami burong gĕroda;
Mĕndapat hukum daripada raja,
Di-lorong Yahudi ada sĕdia.
14. *Abu Siti Lane (Lorong Pusi) off Burmah Road (Tarek Ayer).*
Kita Ambun Jawa Sĕnasi,
Kĕluar mĕniaga sa-rata nĕgĕri;
Nyai Dasimah punya ganti,
Di-Tarek Ayer, Lorong Pusi.
15. *Dato' Kĕramat Road beside the jail (Kĕbun Nyior).*
Mĕlayu pĕnyamun tanah Inggĕlis,
Pantalĕn hitam, baju puteh;
Sa-barang kĕrja Mĕlayu buleh,
Di-kĕbun Nyior Sĕri Majlis.

16. *Dato' Kěramat.*

Askar Kurdi těrķějut bangkit,
Měndapat sěru kita těrbit
Jikalau sarok, kita ta'tabek,
Dato' Kramat mēnchari sabit.

17. *Mc Alister Road (Jalan Baharu).*

Troop Albania jajahan Itali,
Ibarat rimau mati běrdiri;
Alatan dunia ta'ambil pėduli,
Jalan Baharu sėdia mēnanti.

18. *Halfway Road (Lorong Sa-kěrat).*

Radin mēntěri putěra Kuripan,
Jatoh ashek ka-Ken Tabohan
Wira Undani jadi harapan
Lorong sa-kěrat punya aturan.

